Chapter 67: The Dancing Ghost

THE DIAMOND PALACE
WE HAVE BEEN EXPECTING YOU.
ALLOW ME TO SHOW YOU THE WAY.
IF GAO SHUN IS COMING WITH ME, WHY IS JINSHI COMING ALONG, TOO?

LOOK AT HIM. BACK TO HIS USUAL CELESTIAL NYMPH ACT.
KRKBIT KRRBIT
GLARE...
GRIN
WAAAH!
I WONDER, DOES GAO SHUN KNOW? HOW MUCH DOES HE KNOW?
COULD IT BE THAT GAO SHUN ISN'T A EUNUCH, EITHER?
WELL... WONDERING ABOUT IT WON'T HELP.

QUITE THE CROWD OF ONLOOK-ERS.
OOOH
AAAH
GRRRK...
THE BATH IS THIS WAY.
PARDON ME.

GHOSTS AND CURSES CAN'T KILL PEOPLE.
EVERY DEATH HAS AN OBSERVABLE CAUSE.
WHAT PEOPLE TEND TO CALL A "CURSE" IS JUST...
...BEING SICK WITH ANXIETY.

IN THERE.
THROUGH THIS WINDOW, INTO THE NEXT ROOM.
WHERE DID YOU SEE THE GHOST?
...A STRANGE FIGURE, DANCING.
I SAW, AT THE BACK ...
TSK. HAVE YOU NOT GIVEN UP ON THIS, YET?
GH
JOLT

YOU MUST HAVE JUST BEEN SEEING THINGS, YES?
AND I KNOW YOU WOULDN'T TURN DOWN THE ATTENTION IT BRINGS.
I WOULD HOPE YOUR HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING WOULD DO HER DUTY AND CHIDE YOU FOR SUCH BEHAVIOR.
IT'S REALLY NOTHING WORTH SUCH A DRAMATIC SHOW.
BUT YOU INSIST ON INVOLVING SO MANY PEOPLE IN IT.

I SUPPOSE HAVING HER POSITION SNATCHED AWAY BY A SIMPLE FOOD TASTER...
...LEAVES HER WITH PLENTY OF PENT UP ANGER SHE VENTS WITH HER SHARP TONGUE.
IS THAT HAUGHTY WOMAN HER FORMER HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING, PERHAPS?
DON'T YOU THINK SO, SIR JINSHI?
HM
OF COURSE.

BUT MY DUTY IS TO HEAR THE CONSORTS OUT WITH WHATEVER IT IS THEY NEED.
I COULDN'T SIMPLY IGNORE HER, NOW COULD I?
R—
...RIGHT.

NO NO! I CAN!
I'LL DO IT!
MURMUR
I CAN FETCH YOU SOME WATER!
MMBL
I'M FEELING A TAD THIRSTY.

HM...

THMP
THMP
THMP
NO, I GOT IT!
NO, ME!
THMP
THMP
THMP

NOW, CONSORT LISHU.
COULD YOU GO INTO MORE DETAIL?
WELL...
I HAD JUST FINISHED BATHING, AS PER USUAL.

THE LADIES-IN-WAITING HAD DRAWN HOT WATER FOR ME, AGAIN, AS PER USUAL.
I TYPICALLY WAIT FOR THE WATER TO COOL DOWN A LITTLE FIRST.
MY LADIES-IN-WAITING... DON'T ESPECIALLY CARE FOR ME.
AND I HAD BATHED ALONE IN MY TIME AT THE CONVENT.
SO I DO MUCH THE SAME HERE.
I'M HELPED WITH MY CLOTHES BY KANAN—
ER...
THAT IS, MY HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING.
AND THEN ...
WHILE I WAS DRYING OFF...
...I FELT A BIT TOO HOT, SO I LIFTED THE BAMBOO BLIND.
FLAP...
...THOUGH THE ROOM IS FULLY SEALED OFF FROM ANY WIND GETTING IN...
...I COULD SEE SOME-THING SWAYING.

IT WAS...
...A FIGURE, WEARING THE CURTAINS LIKE A ROBE, DANCING IN THE DARK ...
...AND A FAINT ROUND FACE SUSPENDED IN THE AIR...
...STARING RIGHT AT ME.
IT WAS SMILING.

FWM
FWM
COULD IT HAVE JUST BEEN SOMEONE ELSE THAT WAS IN THE AREA?
NOBODY ELSE WAS NEARBY. KANAN SAW THE GHOST, TOO.
NOT A SOUL WAS AROUND.
I DREW CLOSE TO IT TO SEE WHAT IT WAS...
...WHEN THE GHOST SUDDENLY VANISHED, AND THE CURTAINS BECAME STILL.
THE ROOM WAS EMPTY, THE WINDOWS SEALED, AND NO VENTILA-TION...
...YET THE CURTAINS WERE SWAYING.

FLAP
I CAN SEE THE WHITE WALL AT THE BACK OF THE NEXT ROOM.
IN BOTH THE CRYSTAL PALACE AND THE JADE PALACE...
...THE ROOM CONNECTED TO THE BATH IS MEANT TO BE FOR RELAXING AFTER BATHING.
THIS ROOM IS CLEARLY NOT. STRANGE.
HAS THIS ADJOINING ROOM ALWAYS BEEN USED FOR STORAGE?

NO, IT WASN'T A STOREROOM IN THE PAST.
THEN WHY IS IT ONE NOW?
... WELL ...
SEVERE MOLD.
LIKELY DUE TO THE HUMIDITY IT ACCUMULATED, BEING NEXT TO THE BATH.
THE MOLD CAN'T SIMPLY BE SCRUBBED AWAY AT THIS STAGE.
YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND IF YOU LOOK AT THIS.
AH. I SEE.

AND THUS, THIS ROOM WAS TURNED INTO A STOREROOM.
...TO BE MORE DILIGENT ABOUT CLEANING UP MOLD WHEREVER IT POPPED UP.
WELL, I SUPPOSE IT'D BE RATHER DIFFICULT TO ASK THE LADIES-IN-WAITING HERE...
THIS BUILDING ISN'T PARTICULARLY OLD, IS IT?
NO.
IT WAS CONSTRUCTED WHEN LADY LISHU WAS TAKEN IN AS A CONSORT.
SQSH...
IT MAY BE MORE THAN SIMPLE MOLD.
THE WALL ITSELF COULD BE ROTTING FROM WITHIN.
HOW MANY YEARS HAS THIS BEEN HERE?

CONSORT LISHU SAID THE CURTAIN WAS SWAYING.
SWISH
TMP
TMP
TMP
CRRRK...

THE HOLE THAT DRAINS THE WATER FROM THE TUB.
...AH-HA.
IT MUST CHANNEL THE WATER INTO THE INNER COURT'S WATERWAY FROM HERE.
LADY LISHU. THE DAY YOU WITNESSED THE GHOST ...
...DID YOU ACCIDENTALLY PULL THE BATH PLUG AND DRAIN THE WATER?
AS I THOUGHT.
...YES.
I WASN'T THINKING, SO I...

SIR GAO SHUN.
WOULD YOU PLEASE ASSIST ME IN MOVING THIS SHELF?
OF COURSE.
A GAP BETWEEN THAT PLANK AND THE WALL.
AND THAT MEANS ...
IF I STEP THERE WITH MY FULL WEIGHT, I MAY JUST FALL THROUGH.
CRRK...
CRRK...
I WILL FETCH THE BUILDING PLANS FOR THE DIAMOND PALACE WITHOUT DELAY.
IS THERE ANY WAY TO CHECK IF AN AQUEDUCT RUNS UNDERNEATH HERE?

AS I THOUGHT, THE AQUEDUCT UNDERNEATH THE FLOOR RUNS RIGHT ALONG THIS WALL.
THE HOT WATER RUNS THROUGH IT, SO...
...THE STEAM IT GIVES OFF HAS BEEN CAUSING THIS WALL TO ROT.
BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ROUND FACE I SAW?!
HM...
AND THAT SAME STEAM ROSE THROUGH THE GAP IN THE FLOOR BY THE CURTAIN...
...THUS CAUSING THE CURTAIN TO SWAY.

GLANCE
GLANCE
AH!
THAT'S...
OH?

PLEASE, HANDLE IT WITH CARE.
THAT IS... VERY IMPORTANT TO ME.
OF COURSE.
FLAP
IN THE MIDST OF THIS DECAYING ROOM...
...THIS ALONE REMAINS PRISTINE.
A GORGEOUS BRONZE MIRROR.

HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN HERE?
NOT LONG. I USED IT IN THE PAST...
...BUT WHEN THE FOREIGN ENVOY BROUGHT MIRRORS ...
...I SWITCHED TO USING THEIR GIFT, INSTEAD.
THE MIRRORS THE ENVOYS BROUGHT ARE MADE OF GLASS, FAR MORE REFLECTIVE THAN ANY MIRROR OF BRONZE.
IT ONLY MAKES SENSE SHE'D STOW THIS ONE AWAY.
BRONZE MIRRORS ARE VERY PRONE TO GROWING CLOUDY, BUT THIS ONE IS SPOTLESS.
SHE MUST STILL TAKE CARE OF IT.
YOU POLISH THIS EVERY DAY, DON'T YOU?
YES.
MY MOTHER LEFT ME THIS MIRROR, AFTER ALL.

WHY NOT MAKE USE OF IT NOW, FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE?
SWP
TWIRL
TRY TURNING IT THIS WAY. THAT SHOULD REFLECT THE LIGHT BETTER.
?
IF WE GET SOME LIGHT IN HERE...
...IT'LL BE MUCH EASIER TO SEE.

...A FACE ON THE WALL ?!
IS THAT ...

WHAT... IS THIS?
A MAGIC MIRROR?
A MAGIC MIRROR. I'VE NEVER SEEN ONE IN PERSON BEFORE.
AH. SO THAT'S WHAT IT'S REFLECTING.
A VERY MYSTERIOUS SORT OF MIRROR...
...THAT PROJECTS AN IMAGE ALONG WITH THE LIGHT IT REFLECTS. IT CAN BE A PICTURE, OR LETTERS, OR SO ON.
THEY'RE CRAFTED WITH A BUMPY, UNEVEN SURFACE.
IT'S QUITE A FEAT TO MANAGE THAT.
OR SO MY PA'S TOLD ME.

THIS FACE...
...LOOKS JUST LIKE MY DECEASED MOTHER.
MOTHER, WERE YOU... ANGRY I HAD PUT YOUR MIRROR AWAY?
IS THAT WHY YOU APPEARED IN THIS ROOM?
I REMEMBER HEARING SHE LOVED TO DANCE...
...BUT AFTER BEARING ME, SHE WAS TOO UNWELL TO DO SO ANYMORE.
SO NOW, AFTER PASSING AWAY...
...SHE CAN DANCE AGAIN, AS A GHOST.

I CAN'T SAY I KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT MOTHERS.
...IS SOMETHING THAT PROVIDES HER A MEASURE OF COMFORT IN THE INNER COURT.
PERHAPS POLISHING HER MEMENTO FROM HER MOTHER EACH AND EVERY DAY...
SHE SHOULD BE GIVEN FREE REIGN TO DO AS SHE LIKES.
BUT...
...IT'S CLEAR THAT CONSORT LISHU SEES HERS AS A WOMAN WORTHY OF RESPECT AND ADORATION.

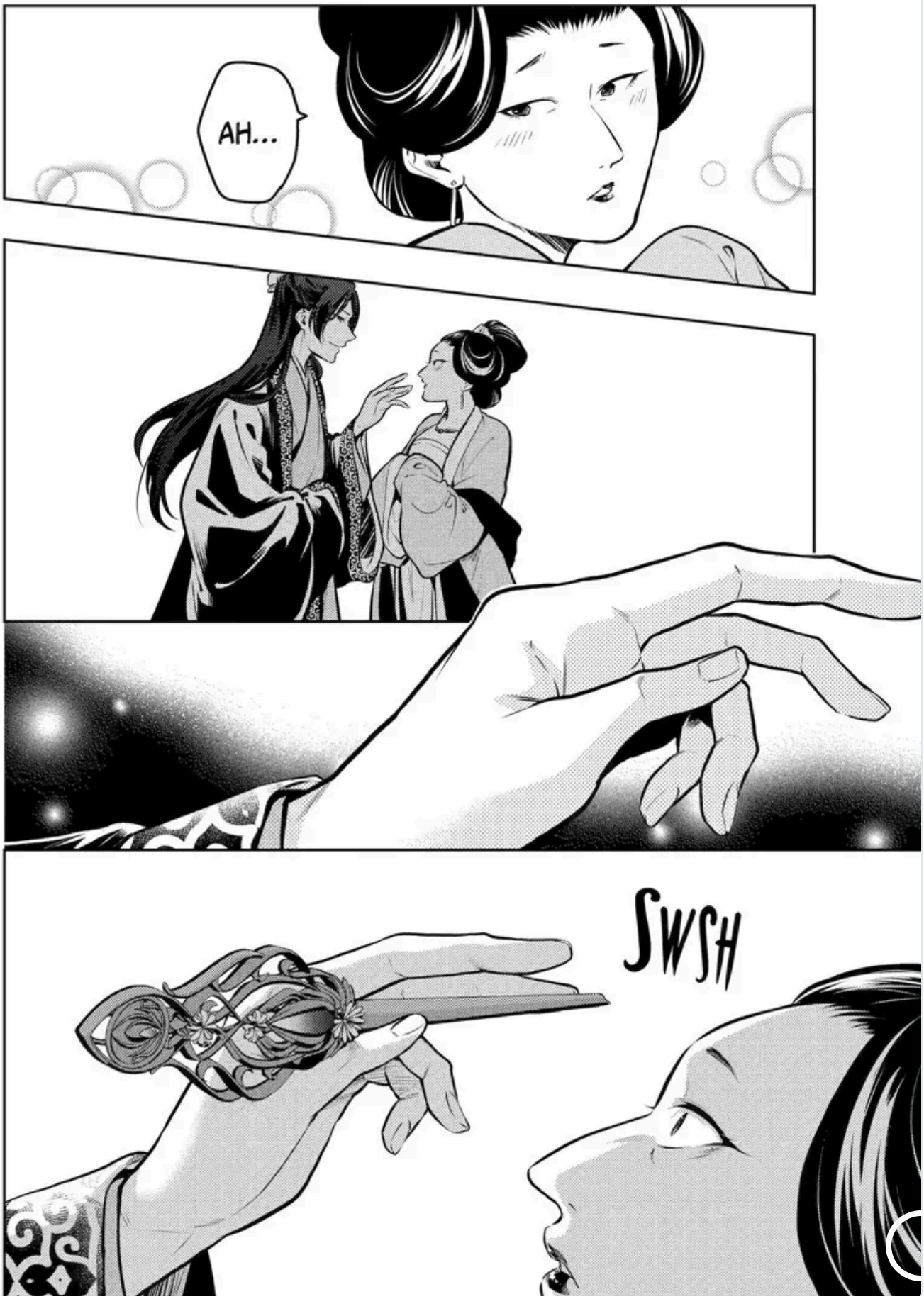
AHEM.
THE TEA IS READY FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT.

OH, MY. LADY LISHU, WHAT COULD YOU BE CRYING ABOUT?
AND IN FRONT OF OUR GUESTS, TOO? HOW EMBAR-RASSING.

ON THE SURFACE, SHE ACTS LIKE A LADY-IN-WAITING WITH THE PROPER RESPECT FOR HER CONSORT.
BUT HER FEIGNED INNOCENCE BECOMES ALL TOO APPARENT ON CLOSER INSPECTION.
A THIRD-RATE CONSORT WHO PUTS ON A SHOW FOR THE MEN, BUT COULDN'T CARE LESS ABOUT THAT BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.
THAT'S THE KIND OF WOMAN SHE IS.
YOU HAVE A MUCH BETTER MIRROR, DON'T YOU? A GIFT FROM THE FOREIGN ENVOY.
TSK. THAT MIRROR...
THE KIND WHO BRINGS RETRIBU-TION UPON HERSELF.
MAYBE THIS WOULD BE BETTER SERVED AS A GIFT, ITSELF?
YOU'RE STILL HOLDING ON TO THIS THING?
FWM

WELL!
SQUEEZE
SUCH CONDUCT IN FRONT OF OUR GUESTS! I NEVER!
OH, DEAR...
HAAH...
AND YET...
...THAT LOOKED LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN A CONSORT'S TANTRUM.
SEEING THAT OUTBURST IN ISOLATION...

カ CLACK ッ
カ CLACK ッ
THAT SEEMS VERY IMPORTANT TO HER.
IT MAY NOT BE SO WISE TO SNATCH IT AWAY WITHOUT KNOWING FOR SURE.


AH...
SWSH

THIS HAIRPIN MUST'VE BEEN GRANTED TO YOU, NO?
EVEN IF THIS WERE GIVEN TO YOU AS A GIFT...
...A SIMPLE LADY-IN-WAITING WEARING ANYTHING THAT BEARS A HIGH-RANKING CONSORT'S CREST IS...

...ENTIRELY INAPPRO-PRIATE.
WERE YOU NOT AWARE?
SHUDDER...

JINSHI IS AWARE OF WHAT THE LADIES-IN-WAITING ARE DOING...
...BUT OPENLY DRAWING ATTENTION TO IT WOULD HARM CONSORT LISHU'S REPUTATION.
BUT HARD EVIDENCE GIVES HIM SOMETHING TO WORK OFF OF.
IT IS NOT SOMETHING FOR A EUNUCH TO INVOLVE HIMSELF IN.
PLEASE...
...TRY TO CONDUCT YOURSELF WITH YOUR POSITION IN MIND FROM NOW ON.

JOLT
JOLT
SLUMP...
THE OTHERS JUMPED AWAY LIKE THEY COULD BE NEXT.
I CAN'T BLAME THEM.
HE'S FAR SCARIER THAN ANY GHOST.